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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study examined the issue of educational equity in student placement as it related to the first-grade reading program in the San Diego City Schools. Four first-grade classrooms from four different schools, one in each of the districts's four operations areas, were selected for study as being representative of the geographic location, school enrollment, racial/ethnic census, number of limited English proficient students, and participation in categorically funded programs. Data gathered included: observations of classroom instruction; simultaneous analysis of the observations to develop categories based on recurrent routines, events, and interaction patterns contained in the observations; interviews with teachers; and teachers' documents about individual students' progress through the basal textbooks. Results indicated that: (1) students with low reading skills received the same amount of instructional time as average and above-average readers; (2) very few students actually were moved into different reading groups during the year; (3) students received their reading instruction in achievement groups and continued working with their group members for seatwork and with the classroom aide during the reading period; (4) untrained aides were used for small group work with students; and (5) teachers closely followed the instructional approach prescribed in the teacher's guide for all groups. Findings suggest that by following the basal reader textbook almost exclusively and placing students into achievement groups, the district's reading program was not providing all first grade students with equal opportunities to receive the highest quality reading instruction. A brief postscript to the study adds the information that, during 1990-91, the school district began implementing a new English language arts program using a literature-based and integrated approach to the teaching of the language arts. (RS)

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Descriptive Analysis of Educational Equity and Grouping for Reading Instruction in First Grade Classrooms[1]

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Presented at the annual meeting of
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The evaluation study was designed to examine the issue of educational equity in student placement as it relates to the reading program at first grade in San Diego City Schools, San Diego, California. The evaluation serves as a follow-up to previous district evaluations on equity in student placement practices that found less than half of first grade students completed the grade-level basal textbook as specified by the publisher. Disproportionate to their enrollment in the district, high percentages of African American students and Hispanic students did not complete the grade-level textbook by the end of first grade. The intent of San Diego City Schools' Policy on Equity in Student Placement is for all students to have access to the highest degree of quality education. Students are to be grouped for reading instruction as determined by their performance on standardized and criterion-based tests and teacher judgment as recommended in the district's reading handbook. The smaller size of the reading groups is thought to allow teachers to pace instruction to meet the individual student's needs. District procedures specify that students are to progress to an appropriate group based on their mastery of the instructional materials.

In most elementary school classrooms, the basal reader series is considered to "drive" reading instruction (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1986). Based on her research, Shannon (1982) indicates that instruction in basal reader textbooks makes up from 75 to 90 percent of how time is spent during reading in many classrooms. Findings from the evaluation of the district's reading program showed

that 88 percent of first and fourth grade teachers used the basal reading materials daily. They emphasized the basal reading strand considerably more for reading instruction than the literature, reinforcement, and content strands of the district's reading program. In light of the overall importance of reading in the elementary school curriculum and teachers' heavy reliance on the basal reader textbook, student placement in the basal reader was selected as a means of evaluating student progress and equitable practices in grouping elementary school students for instruction.

A previous evaluation study of student progress through the basal reader found that at first grade less than half of the students completed the grade-level basal reader textbooks specified by the publisher during the 1985-86 school year. In the Houghton Mifflin Reading Series used by the district, the following textbooks are recommended to be completed by the end of first grade: Bears, Balloons, Boats, Sunshine, and Moonbeams. The evaluation findings indicated that fewer African American students completed the publisher's specified grade-level textbook, Moonbeams, than did students in the other racial/ethnic groups in comparison to their representation in the district's student enrollment. An evaluation of students' progress through the basal reader for the 1986-87 school year found that more students completed the basal readers at or above grade-level at all grades than reported for the previous year. However, differences continued in student placement, progress in the basal readers, and differential completion rates among racial/ethnic

groups.

The use of achievement groups for reading instruction has been widely studied. Based on her review of the research literature, Hiebert (1983) suggested that the experience of receiving instruction in the high-level reading group may be very different from that of being in the low-level group in terms of the teacher's allocation of instructional time and social interaction patterns. These, in turn, could influence the learning and social outcomes for students in terms of reading development and affective and social behavior. A frequently voiced concern in the research literature is once students are assigned to reading groups, they are unlikely to be moved. Allington (1983) argues that good and poor readers differ in their reading ability because of differences in teacher instruction as much as variations in individual learning styles or aptitudes. Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkerson (1985) suggest that a student's future attainment is more likely to be influenced by initial reading placement than by the student's actual abilities. A related concern is that the gap between the achievement groups increases significantly as children progress through elementary school, and there seems to be a good deal of truth to the statement "once a bluejay, always a bluejay."

The evaluation addressed two broad issues. The first issue related to how reading instruction was carried out in first grade classrooms through use of the instructional materials, ability group assignments, time allocation, teacher-student interactions, pacing of

content, individual learning styles, and teaching practices. All may influence the high percentage of students completing first grade in below grade-level basal reader textbooks. The second issue was to identify what enables some students to complete the first grade reading textbooks successfully and others to be less successful. In the earlier district evaluation studies, fewer African American students and Hispanic students completed the publisher's specified grade-level basal readers by the end of first grade than other racial/ethnic groups. This disparity among racial/ethnic groups in the basal reader textbook completion rates was noted beginning in first grade and continued throughout the elementary school years. The finding suggests many African American students and Hispanic students may be falling behind in acquiring basic skills and, therefore, learning with a real disadvantage from early on in their education.

Evaluation Methods

The evaluation was designed to explore the findings of earlier district evaluation studies. While those evaluations present a quantitative picture of student placement practices at the elementary school level, the intent of the current evaluation was to describe reading instruction in first grade classrooms and identify instructional practices which enable some first grade students to be successful and others to be placed in below grade-level basal textbooks as specified by the publisher.

The evaluation was conducted using qualitative methods. A qualitative approach employs the fieldwork methods associated with

anthropology and has been described as naturalistic or ethnographic research. Dorr-Bremme (1985) advised that the goal of such evaluation is to describe and explain a program and its consequences in terms of the points of view and beliefs of the participants. Wolcott (1984) suggested that ethnography can be viewed as an alternative to evaluation. Its purposes are to understand rather than judge and to examine human behavior as part of larger cultural systems. The data are collected to describe the participants' actions and events as they occur in the natural setting. Unstructured observations and intensive interviews are used to gather the data. Based on specific themes, recurrent patterns, and concepts that are identified in the accumulating data, analytic categories are developed which shape further data collection and explicate daily activities and events from the participants' perspective.

The main focus of inquiry was to examine teachers' and students' actions within the context of the first grade reading program. The second focus was to understand the teachers' perspectives about the reading program, giving close attention to what teachers considered to be its successful and unsuccessful features. The evaluation questions established the study's scope and information that was collected. Special attention was given to conducting an evaluation study which would yield credible, applicable, ethical results following qualitative methods and at the same time, meet the informational needs of the school district.

The data elements were as follows: 1) observations of classroom

instruction; 2) simultaneous analysis of the observations to develop conceptual categories based on recurrent routines, events, and interaction patterns contained in the observations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967); 3) interviews to further explicate the observations and obtain teachers' perceptions and thoughts about the first grade reading program; and, 4) teachers' documents about individual student's progress through the basal textbooks along with recommendations for next year's basal reader placement.

Limitations of the study were that the teachers' participation in the study was voluntary, and the sample size was limited to one first grade classroom at each of four elementary schools. However, these limitations may be offset by the amount of detail and in-depth analysis that were performed to study teachers' actions and classroom events as related to reading instruction and consequence for students learning. In addition, the classroom observations were conducted to study teachers' reading instruction as it occurred during the scheduled reading period. Other aspects of the reading program such as the reinforcement, content, or literature strands were not directly observed but studied through data obtained from the teacher interviews.

Sample

Four elementary schools were selected for study based on several criteria. First, in order to extend the data base of reading observations from the previous district evaluations, schools were selected from the sample of 18 schools studied earlier. Based on the

California Assessment Program (CAP) test results for spring 1987, seven elementary schools were matched by sixth grade reading scores within the expected performance bands determined by socioeconomic indices and percent of limited English proficient students. One school was selected from each of the four school operations areas with attention given to each school's representativeness by geographic location, school enrollment, racial/ethnic census, number of limited English proficient students, and participation in categorically funded programs and the district's Achievement Goals Program (AGP). Participation in the study was voluntary. All school principals who were contacted agreed to participate in the study.

Each school principal selected one first grade teacher in whose classroom the observations would take place. The teachers' participation in the study was voluntary. The four teachers selected were all experienced teachers. Three of the teachers had between 18 and 22 years' experience teaching in this district. One teacher was in her first year as a contracted teacher with San Diego City Schools. However, she had more than ten previous years as a substitute, basic skills teacher, and English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher with other school districts. All four teachers were regarded as competent by their peers and comfortable with the observations taking place in their classrooms. Because of the high interest expressed by the other first grade teachers, group interviews involving all of the first grade teachers were conducted at each of the four schools in addition to the interviews with the teachers whose classrooms had been

observed.

Classroom Observations

The classroom observations were conducted during reading instruction; ranged from 105 to 120 minutes; and, took place during March and April 1988. The observations took place on three consecutive days (Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday) at each of the four schools. In each classroom studied, extensive verbatim notes of the teachers' and students' actions during reading instruction were recorded by two observers. The reading instruction was carried out as the first instructional activity in the morning at each school. The observers arrived before the instruction began and stayed until the teacher completed the instructional program. This was marked by the teacher dismissing the students for recess at three of the schools and by lunch dismissal at the fourth. Reading instruction was scheduled to take place between 8:30 and 10:30 a.m. at two schools; 9:00 to 11:00 a.m. at the third school; and, 9:15 to 11:15 a.m. at the fourth school.

The field notes were recorded using an observation form developed by the author for studies of teacher-student interactions in classrooms. The time was recorded every five minutes and running notes were kept on the actions of the teacher and students during reading. By using two observers, one observer focused on the reading instruction as each group took part in the reading circle with the teacher; while the second observer focused on the students' actions during independent seatwork and with the instructional aide. Each

observer followed at least one achievement group for the reading circle, independent seatwork, and small group work with the instructional aide in order to allow that particular observer to concentrate on the sequence of events which occurred during the daily reading program. At the completion of the observations at each school, the observers held a debriefing session to clarify and develop concepts emerging from the data.

Teacher Interviews

At the four schools, interviews were conducted with the first grade teachers, principals, and, at one school, the vice principal. The interviews were held after school hours and ranged from 45 to 80 minutes in length. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions intended to explore the teachers' thoughts about district policies relating to reading instruction in first grade and other issues emerging from the classroom observations or concerns raised by the teachers.

School Documents' Review

An additional meeting was scheduled with each of the four teachers to review teacher documents and records of student progress in the basal reader along with recommendations for the next year's placement. These meetings took place at the end of the school year.

Teachers' Advisory Committee

An advisory committee to the evaluation was composed of 14 members representing teachers with experience teaching first grade along with central office administrative staff. Teachers with broad experience

teaching first grade reading were nominated by the language arts education department. Teachers were selected from schools in each of the four school operations areas. In order to obtain a broad-based view of the district's reading program, teachers on the advisory committee were not from the four schools included in the study. The committee met three times to review the evaluation findings. Minutes were kept of each meeting and shared with the participants. In addition to the teachers' advisory committee, a two hour meeting was held with the principals from the four schools in the study along with selected district management staff with expertise in reading to review and respond to the evaluation findings.

Data Analysis

The constant comparative method of hypothesis testing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was followed so analysis could occur at the same time as the data were being gathered. The data collected through classroom observations and teacher interviews were compared and analyzed to identify recurrent patterns and relationships in the teachers' interactions with students within the context of reading instruction. Analytic categories were generated and developed for coding the data and testing emergent hypotheses. This allowed the evaluator to examine the instructional and social organization of the first grade reading program as it emerged from the data. The data were formatted and analyzed using The Ethnograph (Seidel, Kjolseth & Clark, 1986).

The observation data and interview data from the four classrooms were combined and treated as a single database. The data were coded

into five major categories developed to study the evaluation questions and respond to issues emerging from debriefing sessions held with the evaluators and teachers' advisory committee meetings. These major categories were: 1) achievement grouping for instruction; 2) instructional materials; 3) classroom management and organization; 4) interaction patterns in the classroom; and, 5) individual learning styles. Based on recurring actions, concepts, and phrases noted in the data, subcategories, based on observed behavioral sequences and teachers' interview responses were developed to provide more in-depth analyses. These findings were further studied following the procedures outlined by Becker (1958): testing observed relationships in the field setting; developing frequency and distribution checks; and, confirming hypotheses through further analysis.

Results

The findings from the classroom observations, teacher interviews, and review of school documents are reported in this section. The classroom settings in which the observations took place are described first. Results are given for each of the five major categories: 1) achievement grouping for instruction; 2) instructional materials; 3) classroom management and organization; 4) interactional patterns in the classroom; and 5) individual learning styles.

Classroom Settings

The physical settings of the four classrooms varied considerably. One class was located in a small bungalow room. An instructional aide or parent volunteer worked in the classroom assisting students with

independent seatwork or grading papers while the teacher worked with students in the reading groups. Two classrooms in newer schools were loft-type rooms with carpeting and an adjoining small conference room where the instructional aides worked with small groups of students. One classroom was conducted in a more traditional setting and the instructional aide worked with student groups in the hallway. At this school, five other rooms also had instructional aides who worked with students in the hallway at the same time. All classrooms were attractively decorated with bulletin boards and posters, contained learning stations, and had shelves of books for students' independent reading. Parent volunteers were observed working in three of the classrooms. The teachers reported that the parent volunteers came weekly and corrected paperwork, put up bulletin boards, assisted students with seatwork, or taught computer skills.

In each of the four classrooms studied, the teachers used the Houghton Mifflin Reading Program as basic instructional materials for teaching reading. The teachers were observed to provide direct instruction to reading groups ranging from five to eleven students. Two teachers studied conducted three reading groups; two conducted four groups with one of these teachers instructing limited English proficient students in the district's English for limited English proficient (ELEPS) program during this time.

The reading circles ranged in length from 20 to 38 minutes with a median of 28 minutes and were conducted daily. The teachers followed a similar schedule of first working with students reading in the

lowest-level basal reader, next with the middle-level basal reader, and ending the reading instruction by working with the highest-level reading group. While the teacher was working with a reading group, other students worked independently on class assignments at their seats or with other students; worked in their assigned reading group with the instructional aide; or, worked at learning centers in the classroom.

Achievement Grouping for Instruction

In each classroom observed, students were placed into three or four groups for reading instruction in the basal textbooks. When the observations were conducted in March and April, students were observed reading in Balloons - preprimer to Skylights - beginning second grade textbook as specified by the publisher. The teachers reported that they typically formed their reading groups by the sixth week of school. They informally tried students out in different reading groups to determine the most appropriate placement.

Once placed, students tended to stay in the same group. Only 15 students (13.5 percent) among the four classrooms studied were actually moved once the reading groups were established. Of these 15 students, 13 students were moved into a higher level group. Two students who had been redeployed to a higher-level group in another classroom were judged as not successful and returned to a lower-level textbook in their classroom. The teachers interviewed indicated that they used redeployment only as a last resort because it was difficult to find time to communicate with the teachers who were instructing

'heir students on a regular basis to monitor progress and pragmatic concerns such as students not arriving in time for reading instruction.

At the end of the school year, 50.5 percent of all students in the four classrooms combined completed first grade at or above the grade-level textbook specified for the Houghton/Mifflin Reading Program. These results closely correspond with the districtwide finding of 52.5 percent of all first graders completing first grade at or above the publisher's specified grade-level textbook presented in earlier evaluations. First grade students completing the school year in the Boats and Sunshine textbooks are considered to be reading below grade-level; Moonbeams are at grade-level; Skylights are above grade-level in the Houghton-Mifflin Reading Program. The percent of students reading at or above grade-level corresponds to the districtwide results given for racial/ethnic groups in the earlier evaluation with disproportionate numbers of African American students and Hispanic students continuing to be completing first grade placed in a basal textbook below grade-level. High numbers of Hispanic and Portuguese students reading below grade-level in the current study may be due to the fact that many of these students came from bilingual or non-English speaking backgrounds and had limited experience reading in English.

Instructional Materials

The teachers identified the basic strand of the reading program in terms of the specific skills that were to be taught and the degree to

which students mastered those skills as measured by their performance on unit tests. As a group the teachers were consistent in the problems that they indentified with the series. The dominant theme was that there was simply too much material to be covered in first grade and insufficient time to cover it well during the school year. The teachers felt strongly that phonics needed to be introduced through a combination of direct instruction of phonetic rules and more opportunities to practice the word-attack skills in context - they did not believe that such opportunities were given in the basal textbooks at first grade. Many teachers expressed the concerns that particularly their low-achieving students needed these skills and opportunities.

Another recurrent concern was the strong emphasis on unit tests to determine students' mastery of reading skills, their textbook assignment, and placement in a particular reading group. This raised concerns about the format, wording of questions, and why certain skills were emphasized and others not on the basal tests. Despite their concerns about the basal tests, the teachers freely admitted that they aligned their instruction to hit hard on skills that they knew would be tested at the end of a unit even if they, as professionals, did not consider a particular skill to be essential. Many of the teachers who participated in the interviews or on the advisory committee raised the question, "What if a student can read but can't pass the test?" As a group, they did not give any clear indication as to how their problem was handled. However, individual

teachers indicated that they were more likely than not to move a student ahead into the next basal reader. Their comments, for the most part, were couched to reflect that these decisions were supported by other evidence drawn from group participation or individual work with the student.

The teachers in the study were all observed to use supplementary materials to enhance their reading program in Houghton Mifflin such as older textbooks and phonics materials. A real concern of the teachers was that they are so busy trying to cover everything in the reading program that students are not getting time to enjoy reading. The teachers made comments such as: "No time for fun activities in first grade like we used to have. We don't have time to do readers' theater anymore." "...with our hectic pacing, the kids are not getting enough time to really be comfortable reading by reading the stories a couple of times."

Classroom Management and Organization

The teachers in the study tried to follow the reading program and pacing charts recommended in the district's reading handbook. Direct reading instruction was provided to each reading group for an average of 28 minutes. The teachers worked with each group following closely the script provided in the teachers' guide which resulted in much uniformity in their wording and instructional strategies. The teachers followed their class schedules and tended to begin and end their reading groups on time. The low-level reading group was scheduled first in each of the four classrooms studied; followed by

the middle-level; and, finally, the high-level reading group. The low-level groups received their full 30 minutes of instruction as a rule and sometimes they received more. When a teacher spent more time than was allocated with a low group, she tended to pace her instruction with the middle-level and high-level groups more rapidly. This sometimes resulted in these groups, particularly the high-level groups getting "short-changed" in the amount of instructional time that they received with the teacher.

While the teachers were working with the reading groups, they simultaneously monitored students working independently in their practice books or on other assigned seatwork. Students from the middle- and high-level groups successfully sought and obtained more assistance from the teacher, aide, or classmates than students in the low-level groups. In three of the classrooms, an instructional aide was available and worked with one achievement group doing reinforcement activities during the time that the teacher was working with reading groups. Inthe other classroom, an aide was available for part of the reading period to assist students working on seatwork.

The quality of instruction given by the aides was observed to sharply contrast with that given by the teachers in terms of content coverage, pacing, and disciplinary practices. The aides were often unclear about the assignment/materials to be covered and had to ask the students, spent a high percentage of their time disciplining students and often were observed to use ineffective strategies to manage students, and often failed to encourage or model quality

language interaction with the students.

Interactional Patterns In The Classroom

The types of interactions occurring between teachers-students, instructional aides-students, and students-students were studied to identify recurring interactional patterns that take place within the context of reading instruction. The instructional interactions occurring during the reading groups were heavily controlled by the teachers who initiated and ended nearly every verbal interaction that was observed during the reading groups. Teachers were "all business" during reading instruction. Following the pacing prescribed in the teachers' guide did not leave much time for spontaneous discussion. Seemingly, in the interest of time, the teachers "cut short" possible discussions that could have taken place on topics of interest to the students and their answers to the students' questions. The teachers were very careful to give each student an opportunity to participate in reading by following the seating arrangement and calling on students in turn to read out loud. Among the four classrooms, only one instance of a teacher making a decision to change a group's activity was noted. The teacher recognized that her low-level group had not understood their practice book assignment, and consequently, she reviewed the previous day's assignment instead of proceeding with the current lesson as planned. The observations indicated that teachers strictly rely on their teacher's guides for reading instruction and, only seldom they make changes in the prescribed

instructional approach and strategies.

While the teachers worked with achievement groups for reading, their classroom aides provided reinforcement activities to small groups of students. The aides had significant problems keeping the students' attention and managing students' behavior. The aide's was generally the weakest component of the first grade reading program. The aides' problems occurred with all of the different level achievement groups. They had difficulty keeping the students quiet and on-task.

Students in each class spent at least one-third and as much as three-quarters of the reading period doing seatwork consisting of assignments from practice books, writing assignments, supplementary phonic materials, and independent reading. There appeared to be an established "group identity" among students in the reading groups by the time that we conducted our observations in the spring. Students in the high-level groups were likely to stay with their work for a longer time than were students in the low-level groups. However, after approximately 15 minutes, regardless of their achievement group, students tended to drift away from working on their assignments whether or not they had been completed. Group members kept tabs on each other and tended to interact with each other over members of other groups. Students spend a considerable amount of time interacting as a group during reading period. By having students work in achievement groups throughout the entire, two-hour reading period, the teachers may unwittingly be setting up a self-fulfilling prophecy

for students in their classrooms. In the study the low-level groups were shown to be composed of at-risk students, African American students, Hispanic students, and students with limited English proficiency. They have limited opportunities to interact with students with more successful work-related habits and reading skills from the high-level reading groups and are exposed to differential socialization during seatwork.

Individual Learning Styles

Teachers in the study agreed that their reading program was well adapted for the more capable readers, but felt it was not the best program for the less successful readers. They believed that elements of the program such as vocabulary development and phonics are not emphasized enough and that these were skills that the students in the low-level groups really needed. Because the teachers were allocating equivalent amounts of time and using standard instructional materials with each achievement group by closely following the basal reader series, the instructional materials and strategies were not matched to the learning styles of individual students. Allington (1984) states that poorer readers will continue to experience ever-increasing deficits unless they are provided with learning strategies and instructional environments that allow them to acquire the skills of successful readers such as learning to read fluently and self-monitor their work. This means additional reading sessions, increased opportunities for silent reading, and more contextual reading assignments as seatwork.

The less capable readers do lag behind in their progress and teachers expressed concern that these students were just not being successful in Houghton Mifflin. One teacher in the study stated, "There is an overwhelming need for something else for children with learning problems." Several teachers used supplementary materials or had students repeat a particular basal textbook for a second time. One teacher in the study took her low-level group out of the basal series all together because she assessed that they were not making any progress in the series.

The issue of whether or not all first graders have the maturity and overall readiness to handle the pace of the reading program was a recurring theme in the interviews and among the teachers' advisory committee members. The teachers questioned that they were trying to accomplish too much in first grade and that too much pressure was being placed on students. With the high expectations and "so many more children today with special needs," many teachers doubted that their fast-paced program was in the best interest of the young child. They were concerned about the effects of all this pressure upon student's self-confidence as illustrated by these comments made by teachers.

A final concern was that the teachers felt instead of trying to teach, test, and reteach skills, they need to consider a different approach for direct reading instruction in the primary grades. They felt that time might be better spent developing students' basic vocabulary and language skills and exposing students to a more

"holistic" reading program. Although teachers reported to be trying to implement each strand to some extent in order to provide a more comprehensive program to students, they spent most time in the basal and devoted little time to other strands. Most teachers were skeptical that they were giving full justice to all four strands of the reading program.

Discussion

The classroom observations showed that teachers are working hard to follow and complete the district's prescribed reading program in first grade and should be commended for their efforts. However, based on the evaluation findings, one would conclude that equity in student placement will not be achieved fully in the first grade reading program due to the practice of grouping students for reading instruction, instructional strategies, and the reliance, even dependence, of teachers on the basal textbooks. The three other strands of the reading program (content, literature, and reinforcement) are virtually ignored. The current study supports findings from the earlier district evaluations which showed: 1) the majority of teachers' direct reading instruction was in the basal reading series; and, 2) 49.5 percent of all students continue to complete first grade reading in below grade-level textbooks as specified by the publisher with disproportionately high numbers of these students being African American students, Hispanic students, and students from bilingual or non-English speaking backgrounds.

Grouping students for instruction by reading level is determined

through the use of the basal tests developed by the publisher and teacher judgement. The teachers used these methods along with the recommendation of the previous year's teacher to form their reading groups. Their groups tended to be established by the sixth week of school. The use of basal tests to determine students' reading level and textbook placement raises substantive issues concerning how "grade-level" is determined by the publisher. Following the recommended procedures contained in the district reading handbook, students' performance on basal tests is used for grouping students for instruction, determining their reading progress, and, also, in making promotion and retention decisions. In a report prepared by the Commission on Reading, National Council of Teachers of English, Watson et. al (1987) present a comprehensive review and discussion of basal tests specific to their limited field testing and the lack of standardization norms or available validation studies. They question the assumption that basal tests and textbook placement substantiate "grade-level" reading performance. Establishing students' reading level and placing students into achievement groups using the standards specified by the publisher is erroneous. This practice is resulting in not all students having equal access to a high quality education and, therefore, placing many students in the low-level groups at a real disadvantage in terms of available learning and social opportunities. Because there is so little mobility reported among the reading groups after the sixth week of school, the practice of grouping students for reading instruction particularly in the primary

grades is setting up tracking patterns for students from early on in their school career. In Becoming a Nation of Readers, Anderson et. al (1985) cite research findings which suggest that it is not so much ability that determines the future attainment of a young child, but the reading group into which the child is initially placed.

The teachers in the study followed their guides closely and controlled the verbal interaction occurring within each reading group to maintain the prescribed content pacing. While students were placed by achievement groups for reading instruction, it was not clear that instructional strategies, reading materials, or allocated time varies much between the different groups or was adapted to accommodate learning styles or individual students. Instructional aides were available in each of the classes studied. We observed that when the aides are used for small group instruction, they spend much of their time dealing with disciplinary problems. The problems related to the aides' uncertainty about how to effectively manage small group instruction, lack of preparation, and their unclear directions to students. Clearly, there must be better ways to utilize the instructional aides as a resource. In some classes, students spend up to 75 percent of the reading period doing seatwork. As students tended to work together with others in their reading group, students in high-level groups and those in low-level groups have differential opportunities to learn successful work-related skills and attitudes. More whole group instruction and mixing of students with different reading levels may allow low-level students to learn successful

strategies and work habits.

When some technique or strategy was judged as unsuccessful with students, the teachers tried to make use of resources such as the basic skills teacher or reading labs if they were available. Not all teachers reported equal access to resources outside the basic classroom program. In theory, students in the primary grades should have high priority to receive such assistance. This assistance is necessary to provide all students a strong reading foundation and opportunity to approach the academic setting on equal terms. In some classrooms teachers had ways of involving parents with their children's reading. However, most teachers did not have a system in place to provide parents ways to assist with reading at home. The self-reports of new teachers indicated that they need additional assistance about how to pace content, classroom management practices, and resources to use when students are not successful.

As a group, the teachers expressed concern that students in their low-level groups did not understand what reading was all about until they were well into the primer-level basal textbook, that is, the fourth book in the sequence of the publisher's specified program for first grade. The main feature of the English-Language Arts Curriculum Framework recommended by the California State Department of Education is, "a systematic literature program with a meaning-centered approach based on intensive reading, writing, speaking, and listening." If our findings can be generalized to other first grade classrooms, it appears that many young children may not understand the relationship

reading has to their work in the preprimer textbooks with the skill-based approach used currenty in the district's reading program.

Conclusions

The main conclusion from the study is that by following the basal reader textbook almost exclusively and placing students into achievement groups, the district's reading program is not be providing all first grade students equal opportunities to receive the highest quality reading instruction. Students with low level reading skills need more time and assistance than they receive currently to become successful readers. Very few students actually were mptedmoved into a different reading group during the year. Students received their reading instruction in achievement groups and continued working with their group members for seatwork and with the classroom aide during the reading period. They had limited interaction with students from other groups, and, for students in the low-level groups, few opportunities to learn the work skills and attitudes of the more successful students. In addition, classroom management and instructional practices such as using untrained aides for small group work with students, closely following the instructional approach prescribed in the teacher's guide for all groups, allotting equal time to high-level and low-level reading groups, and using a skill-based reading program were other features of the first grade reading program that should be changed substantially so that all students receive high quality instruction.

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Postscript to the Evaluation Study

During 1990-91, San Diego City Schools began implementing a new English language arts adoption using a literature-based and integrated approach to the teaching of language arts. District philosophy and techniques of teaching integrated English language to elementary students were reviewed by the textbook adoption committee and sample textbooks for reading and language arts were piloted and evaluated by teachers prior to selection of a district textbook program. In addition, appropriate textbook programs were selected for second language and special education students. The issues of whole-classroom instruction (versus small groups) and educational equity continue to be studied by the district.

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